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Dialogue among civilizations

Letter dated 17 August 1999 from the Chargé d'affaires a.i. of the Permanent Mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to refer to General Assembly resolution 53/22 of 4 November 1998, on the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations, which was adopted without a vote on the basis of the proposal of H.E. Mr. Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran. I wish to report that, in pursuance of paragraph 3 of the resolution, the Permanent Mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran, in collaboration with the School of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University, sponsored a panel discussion on "Dialogue among civilizations; a new paradigm" at United Nations Headquarters on 6 May 1999.

The panel discussion was held in an expectedly packed conference room 3. It was well attended by the United Nations diplomatic corps, members of the Secretariat, academicians, representatives of non-governmental organizations and the media.

In addition to the panellists, the Permanent Representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Dean of the School of International and Public Affairs of Columbia University, the Permanent Representative of Senegal, the Permanent Representative of India, the Permanent Representative of Austria, the Deputy Permanent Representative of Kyrgyzstan, the Deputy Permanent Representative of Italy, as well as several members of the academic community and non-governmental organizations also made statements.

The issue of dialogue among civilizations was discussed from several points of view, including the role of religion in the process, a global approach with particular emphasis on the role of the United Nations, and a micro-level approach with emphasis on the important role of the individual. There seemed to be a fairly broad agreement in the discussions that the initiative of dialogue among civilizations was timely and that it presented a new paradigm which meets the requirements of our age. There was also a broad agreement against the idea of clash of civilizations.

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It was interesting to note that several speakers referred to the following poem by the great thirteenth century Persian poet, Saadi, as perhaps the motto for the enduring and sustained imperative of dialogue among civilizations:

"All Adam's race are members of one frame
"Since all, at first, from the same essence came.
"When by hard fortune one limb is oppressed
"The other members lose their wonted rest.
"If thou feel'st not for other's misery
"A son of Adam is no name for thee."

In view of the importance of the ideas and concepts presented in the panel discussion and the equally important exchange of views that they generated, I have the further honour to transmit herewith a brief executive summary of the panel discussion.

I would be grateful if you could have the present letter and its annex circulated as a document of the General Assembly under item 34 of the provisional agenda.

(Signed) Mehdi **Danesh-Yazdi**
Ambassador
Chargé d'affaires a.i.

Annex

Dialogue among civilizations; a new paradigm

Panel discussion

United Nations Headquarters
6 May 1999

Chairman:	Former Assistant Secretary-General, Mr. Giandomenico Picco
Panellists:	Dr. Vartan Gregorian, President of the Carnegie Corporation of New York
	Professor Richard Bulliet, Director of the Middle East Institute at Columbia University
	Professor Ali Mazrouie, Director of the Institute of Glol al Cultural Studies at State University of New York
	Dr. Javad Zarif, Deputy Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran
Welcome address:	Ambassador Hadi Nejad Hosseinian, Permanent Representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations
	Ms. Lisa Anderson, Dean of School of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University
Other speakers:	Mr. Morat Oussoupov, Counsellor, Permanent Mission of the Kyrgyz Republic to the United Nations
	Mr. Pier Benedetto Fracese, Deputy Permanent Representative of Italy to the United Nations
	Ambassador Iba Deguene Ka, Permanent Representative of Senegal to the United Nations
	Ambassador Kamalesh Sharma, Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations
	Mr. Victor Segesvary, International Civil Servant, Protestant Minister, author
	Ambassador Ernest Sucharipa, Permanent Representative of Austria to the United Nations
	Mr. Richard Jordon, NGO on sustainable development, member of the Board of Governors of the National Arts Club
	Professor Davoud Nabi Rahni, Pace University
	Professor Maboud Ansari, William Paterson University
	Mr. Wayne Smith, Founder and President of NGO, Friendship Force
	Ms. Harriet Mandel, Jewish Community Relations Council
Sponsored by:	Permanent Mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations
	Columbia University, School of International and Public Affairs

Executive summary

Ambassador Nejad Hosseinian of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Dean Anderson of School of International and Public Affairs of Columbia University delivered a short welcoming address.

Ambassador Nejad Hosseinian presented a global approach to "Dialogue among Civilizations" and considered it a new paradigm that would promote an international environment through tolerance which would aim to determine the parameters of a world in which peace and prosperity have a better chance than conflict, hatred, poverty and war — a world in which a greater number of the inhabitants of the earth could potentially enjoy life in peace, security and prosperity.

Dean Anderson spoke of Columbia University as a practitioner of "Dialogue among Civilizations" inasmuch as its student body who come from 75 different countries is concerned. She reasoned that when the leaders from around the world come together to consider the varying interpretations of culture, community, rights, justice, equity, statehood and political authority, the process, notwithstanding clear areas of divergence, would, in fact, provide the building blocks for a more sophisticated, more cosmopolitan, more inclusive international society; a place more of us will feel welcome in.

The first Panellist, Dr. Vartan Gregorian, focused on the role of religions, particularly Islam, in promoting the idea of dialogue among civilizations, in response to stereotyping of Islam by Samuel Huntington in *The Clash of Civilizations*. "Islam has always been a bridge, a crossroads of culture, a place of transit, a passage and, above all else, a refuge." Using Arnold Tynbee's works, Dr. Gregorian argued, Huntington reaches a completely different conclusion because of a total lack of historical, cultural, theological and anthropological knowledge of Muslims. Civilizations, instead of becoming bridges of understanding, became walls of separation, destined for clashes.

Dr. Gregorian reviewed the developing relations between Islam and Christianity, particularly after the unprecedented and welcome announcement known as Nostra Aetate in 1965, by the Second Vatican Council which was considered a turning point in Muslim-Christian dialogue. "President Khatami of Iran went a step further; I would say a bold step. The issue was not knowledge of religion alone, but knowledge of civilizations and peoples, their diversity, their history, their uniqueness as well as their universality. He therefore advocated a meaningful dialogue between the civilizations and peoples comprised in those civilizations." Dialogue, argued Dr. Gregorian, is a road, leading us, if not to friendship, to understanding with respect.

Suggestion: There should be dialogue first of all between the traditional universities of the Muslim world and the secular ones. There should also be dialogue between theological institutions of Iran and all the other Muslim countries and theological institutes in the Western world as well as the Eastern world.

The second Panellist, Professor Bulliet, viewed "Dialogue among Civilizations" from a global angle where the role of the United Nations is absolutely essential. He reviewed the origins of the Charter of the United Nations and the International Bill of Human Rights in the civilizational tradition of the West. "A dialogue of civilizations is right for the historical juncture we are living through with due acknowledgement of the great international compacts of the mid-twentieth century achievements deriving primarily from the western philosophical tradition. We now appropriately turn our attention to an intercivilizational conversation aimed at similarly lofty goals. My personal hope is that the projected dialogue of civilizations will eventuate at some future point in a formal statement on human values, not a charter or compact containing strictures that would be formally

binding on its signatories, but a statement of fundamental human values that elaborates their bases in belief and thought as understood in different civilizational traditions."

Professor Bulliet called such a hypothetical document or documents a world convention on human values which would in all likelihood overlap the ideals and principles embodied in the Charter of the United Nations and the human rights instruments. "But unlike those documents, whose original authority derived from international assent to a philosophy of universal morality emanating from the European cultural tradition, a world convention on human values would represent the moral convergence of human society in all of its civilizational diversity. It would be conceived not as a binding charter, but as an international moral and philosophical standard, a map of the moral common ground upon which people of all civilizations can stand. A world convention on human values would be an appropriate beginning to a new international era in which past, present and future diversity of humankind would be celebrated and the era of domination by a single civilizational outlook would be laid to rest."

Professor Bulliet presented an illustrative list of topics that may be considered as subjects of intercivilizational dialogue for the purpose of a world convention on human values. His suggestions were:

(1) Constitution and citizenship;

(2) Law and legal process;

(3) Religion and personal status;

(4) Sovereignty and boundaries;

(5) Education and dissemination of information;

(6) The economic order;

(7) Social welfare;

(8) Childhood and old age;

(9) Status of women;

(10) The environmental heritage.

Professor Bulliet concluded by recalling the story of "Thirty Birds" in "Conference of the Birds" of the great Iranian poet Fariduddin Attar of 800 years ago, and pointed out that despite the fact that the paths may be different, the ultimate objective of all civilizations are the same. He urged that we take up President Khatami's invitation to engage in a dialogue of civilizations. The understanding of one another that we may hope to achieve whether or not it eventually comes to fruition in an international statement on human values is not only worth the striving, but perhaps is our best chance of forging a harmonious future for the world.

The third Panellist, Professor Ali Mazrouie, presented a micro-level analysis of "Dialogue among Civilizations", arguing that civilizations are about people and people are in small groups, not on grand scales on the map. Therefore, we must look at societies within societies, even within neighbourhoods. He suggested that there are risks within each civilization that not only hamper effective dialogue but also cause tension and conflict (i.e., uneven distribution of skills and income, and societies with diverse ethnic groups and massive record of mutual hostility).

Professor Mazrouie presented a number of cases in Asia, Africa, Europe and the United States to substantiate his two points and to highlight the imperative of "Dialogue among Civilizations" at the local and individual levels.

The fourth panellist, Dr. Javad Zarif, reported on the outcome of the First Islamic Symposium on dialogue among civilizations that had just been organized by the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in Tehran (3–5 May 1999). The Symposium was held upon the initiative of President Khatami who wrote to all Heads of States and Governments of the OIC inviting them to send representatives of high calibre to participate in a dialogue to initiate a dialogue. The Symposium was very well attended despite the fact that it was organized in a short notice.

Dr. Zarif underscored that the thinking in the Symposium was that the starting point for a true dialogue among civilizations ought to be: "the principle of respect, the principle of tolerance, the principle of recognition of the fact that there can be many civilizations — there need not be a single prevalent, predominant civilization in the world — the principle of equality. ... These are important principles that we need to accept in order to launch this dialogue". On subjects of dialogue among civilizations, Dr. Zarif said that it was interesting to note that many of the topics suggested by Professor Bulliet in his presentation today had been dealt with in the final paper adopted by consensus in the Islamic Symposium in Tehran. He further said: "We should not limit dialogue among civilizations to politics. The distinguished members of this panel referred to a very important number of areas of problematics, both at the social and the global levels where dialogue could be of use. They range from the dignity of women, human rights, the elderly, youth and children, to issues of nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction and global threats of terrorism and environmental degradation".

Dr. Zarif argued that the year 2001, the first year of the new millennium, was designated as the Year of Dialogue among Civilizations to signify the imperative of continuity of dialogue. Hence, the final document of the Islamic Symposium (A/54/116, annex) is supplemented with a 10-year programme of action.

The discussion was then opened to the floor.

Mr. Morat Oussoupov, Deputy Permanent Representative of the Kyrgyz Republic to the United Nations, praising the value and the timeliness of the initiative, referred to President Akayev's view on the revival of the "Silk Road diplomacy as a means of promotion of dialogue among civilizations and of achieving sustainable development and strengthening peace and security. He called attention to the harmony and complementarity of the two ideas by the Presidents of Kyrgyzstan and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Mr. Pier Benedetto Francese, Deputy Permanent Representative of Italy to the United Nations, highlighted the continuity of dialogue among civilizations and regarded the Italian Renaissance as an eclectic mix and interactions of civilizations. He reviewed the contribution of Islam to Western civilization and said that the globalization of the world economy and culture was banishing every last vestige of isolationism. He also referred to a joint Iranian and Italian seminar in December 1998 on the topic "Religion, society and state in Iran and Italy" which, like today's panel discussion, aimed to find points of contact between peoples that foster collaboration, regardless of cultural and ethnic differences, in a spirit of mutual understanding. Mr. Francese underscored the imperative need to turn President Khatami's initiative in the fifty-third session of the General Assembly of the United Nations into a sustained process which would serve as a call of inspiration to leaders of Governments and societies in their endeavours.

Ambassador Iba Deguene Ka, Permanent Representative of Senegal to the United Nations, drew the attention of the meeting to the opportunities and challenges that the media can present to the promotion of dialogue among civilizations. He suggested that the role of the media, as called for in General Assembly resolution 53/22, required further study and

articulation in order to take advantage of the uniting force of the media. Ambassador Ka underlined recognition and respect for other cultures as the very basic requisite of dialogue among civilizations. As an example, he pointed out the 20-year presidency of Leopold Sedar Senghor, a Christian, in the overwhelmingly Muslim country of Senegal. Ambassador Ka also recalled that the same President had spoken of universal civilizations, emphasizing the interactive nature of civilization.

Ambassador Kamalesh Sharma, Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations, presented a micro-level analysis of dialogue among civilizations, and concurred with Professor Mazrouie that civilizations are about people and people are in small groups. Ambassador Sharma took the idea a step further and in a philosophical interpretation of dialogue said: "and in the end you are looking into the soul and the heart of an individual and that is where your object is". This notion of dialogue among civilizations (i.e., at the individual level involving the soul and the heart of the individual before the mind learns to get involved) was later elaborated upon by Mr. Wayne Smith, the Founder and President of Friendship Force.

Ambassador Sharma pointed to his unease with the expression concerning monotheistic religions, which implies the inclusion of only Semitic religions. The expression seems to exclude other religions which also believe in only one God, but their adherents have a different experience of religious unfoldment like Hindus. He presented a mystical interpretation of belief in only one God and metaphorically said that since one could not look directly at the sun, one would look wherever the sun can be seen. Ambassador Sharma asked: "If you look at the sun in a million pools of water, are you looking at the million suns or at the same sun? Are deities and divinities different entities or are they simply manifestations or are they endless expressions of what the one divine can be?"

Ambassador Ernest Sucharipa, Permanent Representative of Austria to the United Nations, believed that the welcome initiative of dialogue among civilizations had important and relevant background information and documents to build upon and did not need to start at point zero. By way of example, he referred to the United Nations Year of Tolerance, and the subsequent contribution of Austria in the form of a document on the root causes of hatred resulting from a conference held at Vienna in December 1997, results of several dialogues among major religions, such as the two held in 1993 and 1997 between Iran and Austria, and the declaration that was adopted by the conference of religious leaders of Islam, Christianity and Judaism on Kosovo, organized by the Appeal of Conscience Foundation at Vienna in 1998.

After several other statements and questions and answers, the Chairman, Mr. Picco, concluded by saying that the success of the idea of dialogue among civilizations would be measured by its ability to engender processes of reconciliation in various parts of society and indeed in various parts of the world. "I would suggest here that on the occasion of a dialogue of civilizations we join forces against the only real enemy we have in front of us for the 21st century. That enemy is not a state. It is not a religion. It is not a culture. But it is, indeed, intolerance. History does not kill. Religions do not destroy buildings and institutions do not rape. Only individuals do those things. As we speak there are those who still claim that the origin of their hatred is in history or religion or civilization or culture. Unfortunately, it is not so. Only individuals can hate and only individuals can dialogue. Diversity is not a threat. It is only the beginning of life."